



LET'S GROW Native

Column by Carol A. Heiser



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Habitat quality is the cornerstone of winter survival for Virginia's wildlife. Mammals and birds that live in Virginia year-round compete for available food and other resources in order to generate enough body heat and energy to survive throughout the season. One of the most critical components of winter survival is the amount of available cover, and native evergreens are at the top of the list for providing protection from wind, cold, sleet, and snow.

Eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) is highly beneficial for wildlife shelter. It's a "pioneer" species, one of the first woody stemmed plants to get established after a mowed field is abandoned and no longer managed. Fairly slow growing—only one to two feet per year—these trees can live for over 100 years when allowed to become dominant in the landscape in full sun.

A grouping of old redcedar trees, which can grow to heights of 50 to 60 feet and as much as 20 feet wide, will form a wonderful dense mass of branches filled with young, prickly leaves and older, scale-like leaves. Branches closest to the ground provide effective thermal cover that keeps out wind and snow. This living brush offers snug defense for overwintering birds such as chickadees, kinglets, cedar waxwings, and yellow-rumped warblers. Bluebirds and robins are much more likely to stay in an area during the winter months if they can find a thick stand of cedar trees for hunkering down.

The blue colored "berries" of Eastern redcedar are not true berries but modified cones, whose scales have grown together to form a fleshy covering over the seeds within. These berry-like cones grow on female trees in the spring and become mature in the late fall. Redcedar trees are an excellent source of winter food for dozens of bird species, such as bobwhite quail, wild turkeys, ruffed grouse, mockingbirds, goldfinches, and flickers, and for mammals too, including mice, rabbits, raccoons, and opossums.

Another favorite in the winter landscape is the native American holly (*Ilex opaca*), which has thick, broad leaves rather than needles, but is just as hardy and sheltering. Only female trees produce the familiar, showy, red berries that can persist throughout the winter season. These supply much relished food for birds in very late winter or early spring, before other plants have begun growing again.

A winter habitat would be incomplete without a stand of native pine trees. We have several valuable species such as loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) in the coastal plain and Piedmont, the Virginia pine (*Pinus virginiana*), and the equally common shortleaf pine

(*Pinus echinata*). We shouldn't take these familiar evergreens for granted: they form functional windbreaks and screening, escape cover from predators, and abundant seeds for many wildlife species.

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RESOURCES

- ◆ *Common Native Trees of Virginia: Identification Guide*, VA Department of Forestry: www.dof.virginia.gov/infopubs/Native-Tree-ID-spreads_2016_pub.pdf
- ◆ *Regional Native Plant Guides*: www.plantvirginiannatives.org



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Above top: An American robin dines on native American holly, while here, a cedar waxwing enjoys native redcedar berries.